

A newsletter for school personnel published by the
MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

ABOUT THIS NEWSLETTER

Info for Educators
*is published by the
Massachusetts
Department of
Social Services as
part of an effort to
strengthen the
ability of child
welfare and school
professionals to
work together on
behalf of children
and families.*

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Family Networks,**
a new DSS initiative

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A MESSAGE FROM COMMISSIONER HARRY SPENCE

As a former school official, I know how confusing and impenetrable the child welfare system can seem. But our two systems, schools and child welfare, must often work together to care for and educate children who are urgently in need of consistent, reliable support. We therefore have an obligation to reach across our institutional divide and work as true partners on behalf of those children.

Since child welfare is generally the less well understood of our two systems, we at DSS feel a special responsibility to make our system more accessible to our colleagues in education. We're going through a lot of changes at DSS right now, making the risks of confusion and crossed signals especially great.

This first edition of our new newsletter for educators focuses on the changes we're making and how they will impact schools. In later issues, we'll share practical information and report on how the work is progressing in communities around the state.

My hope for this newsletter is that it will lead to more focused and productive conversations between DSS staff and schools staff. The best communication occurs face-to-face, between people who have developed a relationship of trust and reliance. This publication can never substitute for that, but it can help us talk to one another more easily and with a clearer sense of how our two systems work. The kids can only be better off for that.

WHAT IS FAMILY NETWORKS?

Family Networks is a new approach to providing child welfare services. It is designed to deliver better, more comprehensive services to children and families within their own communities.

Through Family Networks, DSS will collaborate with local agencies to provide services in the community to many children and adolescents who might otherwise be placed in residential programs. For children who do need residential placement, the Family Networks approach will allow their lengths of stay to be shorter and

support their transitions back to their communities.

Family Networks is still new, so many details about its procedures and operations are being developed. But its goals are clear. Over time, Family Networks should produce more permanent placements for children, stronger families and communities, and more effective use of state resources.

Family networks is based on a commitment to six “core practice values.”

For some years, school districts have paid the educational costs for children placed in residential facilities. Many districts have argued that they would prefer to deliver the services in their own schools. Family Networks will give them the opportunity to do so.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND CORE PRACTICE VALUES

Family, or the network of resilient lifelong relationships that family represents, is essential to successful and satisfying adult development.

Family Networks is therefore dedicated to enabling each child to maintain or achieve permanent family or other lifelong connections. Toward that goal, DSS will help parents care safely for their children at home; promote reunification, adoption, or guardianship; or give adolescents the support they need to make a successful transition to stable young adulthood.

Family Networks is based on a commitment to six “core practice

values,” which represent a new way of working with children, families, and communities.

In all its work, Family Networks will use an approach that is:

- Child-driven
- Family-centered
- Community-focused
- Strength-based
- Committed to diversity and cultural competence
- Committed to continuous learning

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN FAMILY NETWORKS

Schools are essential partners in any effort to keep children safe and to support children’s healthy development. Children need to feel engaged in their own learning, and they need to be motivated to attend school regularly. For those reasons, it is important for educators to have an understanding of how the child welfare system operates and what actions it takes to secure children’s safety and well-being.

DSS and the new Family Networks partner agencies will need to collaborate closely with schools and school districts to see that, whenever possible, children and adolescents are able to attend school in their own communities and remain actively involved in the life of their schools. DSS and schools will also need to continue to work together to help children transition back to local schools after a period of out-of-home placement.

Because this work cannot be accomplished alone, DSS will work collaboratively with schools, and support and encourage partnerships between schools and local service providers. In school districts that opt to create new programs, DSS will provide information and other assistance with identifying and meeting the needs of students.

DSS is currently working with the statewide Association of School Superintendents (MASS) and the Administrators for Special Education (ASE) to strengthen existing collaboration between schools and DSS. As Family Networks takes more concrete form over the coming months, DSS is committed to continuing to work with MASS and ASE to foster new forms of collaboration between schools and DSS around the needs of abused and neglected children.

HOW WILL FAMILY NETWORKS BE DIFFERENT FROM THE OLD SYSTEM?

Family Networks will not change the way the Department of Social Services delivers services to most children and families. DSS staff will continue to investigate all cases, and most cases will continue to be handled from beginning to end by DSS social workers in our area offices. School officials will continue to contact DSS social workers for help with resolving problems regarding individual children. But for children and families who need certain specialized types of care and assistance, Family Networks will mean better, more carefully coordinated access to a range of services in their own communities.

Traditionally, Department of Social Services area offices have referred children removed from their homes to a limited collection of “categorical” programs and services, including residential treatment, foster care, group homes, and the Commonworks program for adolescents. In many cases, services that had to be purchased from outside providers were available only to children who had been placed in out-of-home care.

Partly as a result of that system, as well as previous restrictions in its legislative appropriations, DSS has come to rely too heavily on out-of-home placements and has had too little flexibility in purchasing services that could be delivered in the home to children and families.

Under Family Networks, **DSS Area Offices** will continue to be responsible for case management, but families and children found to be in need of services will be referred as well to an **Area Lead Agency**, which will coordinate the actual delivery of services. Area Lead Agencies are nonprofit organizations that have contracted with the state to coordinate a full array of programs and services to families in their areas.

For each family, the Area Lead Agency will convene a **family team meeting**, comprised of family members and people important to them, the service providers who will work with the family, and other community supports. Together, the team members will discuss children’s needs and devise a treatment plan.

To deliver services, teams will rely on an **integrated service network**. In each area, the integrated service network will include a range of providers and agencies that offer purchased services and non-purchased community supports. Clearly, schools will be crucial to the network in every community.

Supporting the area lead agencies will be six **Regional Resource Centers**, located around the state. Like the Area Lead Agencies, the Regional Resource Centers are nonprofit organizations working under contract with DSS. They will support the Area Lead Agencies in a variety of ways, including facilitating access to residential programs, program development, cross-area coordination, and management of special populations.

Family Networks will initially focus on children and adolescents in residential care or at risk of residential placement.

Nearly 11,000 children and adolescents are under the care of DSS. Of those, nearly 2,400 are in residential schools, where, on average, they stay for 2½–3 years. Redeploying the expertise of those schools to support children and families in their communities is an important goal of the Family Networks initiative.

IMPLEMENTING FAMILY NETWORKS: WHAT'S NEXT

In September 2002, workgroups of DSS staff, representatives of nonprofit service providers, and families began to study the existing child welfare system in Massachusetts and to consider the possibilities for change. Their recommendations formed the basis for the Family Networks program design.

DSS then asked nonprofit service providers around the state to submit proposals to become Regional Resource Centers or Area Lead Agencies. Contracts were awarded in the spring of 2005.

Over the next few months, Area Lead Agencies, working with DSS Area Offices, will begin to develop partnerships involving families, providers, and others in their communities. The Area Lead Agencies will invite school officials to get involved in building integrated service networks to serve children and families in all parts of the state. Indeed, educators will be key resources and partners in planning and delivering comprehensive, community-based services.

A Network Services RFR, scheduled to be issued this fall, will be the first step in establishing contracts with the array of

providers that will make up the integrated service network in each area. Regional Resource Centers will begin to provide coordination and support to the Area Lead Agencies. Meanwhile, DSS will begin to forge new relationships with the agencies that are managing services to children and families.

For children and families, Family Networks will mean a greater emphasis on keeping children safe in their families and communities. In the short term, a somewhat larger than usual number of children may be transferred from residential placements back into their families or communities. Meanwhile, fewer children will be placed in residential facilities.

Overall, those changes will mean that more children will be receiving services in their home communities and within their families.

We welcome feedback from educators and encourage you to learn more about Family Networks activities in your area.

To comment or for further assistance, please contact Susan.Stelk@state.ma.us.

See the Massachusetts Department of Social Services website at www.mass.gov/dss for more information about the Family Networks Initiative.